

Legislative & Policy Priorities | 2018

Defend Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) Funding.

Oppose any legislation that would erode the VPK program or its current funding stream.

In 2017, Tennesseans for Quality Early Education (TQEE) and its coalition members successfully defeated legislation which would have allowed school districts the flexibility to use Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten funds for innovations in grades Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd. We expect similar legislation again this year and will defend against it.

RATIONALE: VPK works. Tennessee's VPK program was proven effective by the Vanderbilt University study which documented significant gains by participating students over their non-participating peers at the point of kindergarten entry. TQEE is highly supportive of increased investment to strengthen effective teaching and learning in grades K-2nd – in fact the Vanderbilt Pre-k study, as well as a study by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) of literacy instruction in K-2nd grade - both revealed weaknesses in K-2nd grade instruction. However, we do not support such investments at the expense of VPK.

Support VPK Quality Improvement Initiatives

Support administrative initiatives being implemented by Tennessee Department of Education in response to the Pre-k Quality Act of 2016.

While it's clear from the Vanderbilt study that VPK works, the study revealed significant inconsistencies in the quality of VPK classrooms across Tennessee, prompting TQEE to initiate the Pre-k Quality Act of 2016. That legislation was successfully enacted with near unanimous support in the legislature, and since then TDOE has begun some significant improvements. It is essential that Tennessee preserve the VPK program and its success while continuing efforts to ensure high quality in every classroom across the state. Some highlights of improvements underway include:

- ★ *Pre-k funding is now dependent on quality.* Districts must apply for funds to administer a VPK program. Prior to 2016-17, districts received funds based on formulas that did not change for years. In 2016-17, the Tennessee Department of Education transformed the process by instituting a competitive grant process based on quality benchmarks.
- ★ *Pre-k and kindergarten teachers now have a way to monitor student growth, aligned to academic standards.* In 2017-18 the Tennessee Department of Education instituted a new pre-k and kindergarten student growth portfolio model. This model helps teachers track and continuously monitor student learning aligned to priority literacy and math standards.
- ★ *Curriculum is being transformed.* The Tennessee Department of Education is updating and significantly revising the state-approved pre-k curriculum list to include only evidence-based high-quality curriculum aligned to early learning and literacy standards. The department is investing in training, materials, and support for VPK districts to implement high quality curriculum.

RATIONALE: While we know VPK works, the Vanderbilt study revealed significant inconsistencies in quality in VPK classrooms across Tennessee. It is essential that Tennessee double down on ensuring high quality in every classroom across the state.

Study Early Grades Instructional Quality and Recommend Measures to Strengthen It.

Support TDOE-directed study, in conjunction with Vanderbilt University, to assess instructional quality in Pre-k through 2nd grade and prepare recommendations for strengthening it.

High quality instruction in the early grades – pre-k through 2nd grade – is a top priority for TQEE. To that end, we are supporting two TDOE-directed studies to inform and prepare recommendations for the new Governor and legislature upon their election in late 2018. The studies would be conducted in conjunction with TDOE’s new research-practice partnership with Vanderbilt University – called Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) – and would examine the following research questions:

- ★ Early Grades Teacher Assignment: To what extent do teacher assignment practices across the state result in lower performing teachers being more likely to be assigned to teach in PreK-2nd grade than higher performing teachers? If this is a common practice, why? What are the best solutions?
- ★ Early Grades Instruction Continuous Improvement. What instructional shifts do teacher need to make to deliver high quality early childhood instruction? What data, strategies and infrastructure are needed to support early grades teacher and leader professional development and continuous improvement in instruction?

RATIONALE: 2016-17 TNReady data revealed the alarming news that two-thirds of Tennessee students in grades 3-5 are not reading on grade level, and nearly that number are not meeting grade-level expectations for math. Additionally, classroom observations in the Vanderbilt Pre-k study, and by TDOE in a review of literacy instruction in K-2nd grade, have indicated a significant need for professional development and continuous improvement in Pre-k through 2nd grade instructional practices in many classrooms across the state. Further study, combined with expert recommendations for solutions, are needed to prepare the new administration and legislature for action in 2019.

Advance Legislation that Enhances Parent-Teacher Teamwork in the Early Grades. (HB 2060/SB2571)

Advance legislation that supports TDOE in piloting best practices models that strengthen parent engagement in their child’s teaching and learning Pre-k through 2nd grade.

TQEE will advance legislation that supports TDOE in piloting a parent-teacher conference model in the early grades based on a best practice program such as a model used in comparable states to TN called APTT, or Academic Parent-Teacher Teams. APTT uses team meetings and individual engagement with parents to create a true partnership between parents and teachers whereby both the parents and teachers are knowledgeable about student data and how it demonstrates progress and challenges for the child, and where teachers and parents use that data to set goals for student progress collaboratively.

RATIONALE: From birth, a parent or primary caregiver is a child’s first and most important teacher. Unfortunately, many parents, regardless of education or socio-economic background, lack user-friendly information on their child’s needs and progress or a vehicle to establish true partnership with teachers in educating their child. In parent focus groups conducted by TQEE, parents reported brief parent-teacher conferences that focus on behavior or overall performance of the child, rather than joint approaches to helping the child succeed. Optimal parent engagement that has the greatest impact on the child’s learning will be achieved through intentional parent-teacher partnership. Testing some models for this in Tennessee would help pave the way for expanded parent engagement.



Advance Legislation that Helps Protect Children of Opioid-Addicted Parents.

Advance legislation that prioritizes early intervention programs for young, opioid-affected children.

TQEE will advance legislation that prioritizes early intervention programs for young, opioid-affected children birth through third grade. Features of the legislation may include:

- ★ Expand early childhood home visiting programs to include opioid-affected families with young children;
- ★ Offer training to home visiting staff on providing support for young children and families facing addiction;
- ★ Ensure children with opioid-addicted immediate family members can access VPK and quality child care;
- ★ Expand and/or establish high quality community-based programs that provide supports for opioid-affected children ages 0-3 and their families.

RATIONALE: There are currently more opioid prescriptions in Tennessee than there are people. While there are many ancillary problems associated with this epidemic, the most disturbing may be Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), a condition whereby infants of mothers are born addicted to opioids and must be weaned off the drug dependency. The hardships on infants, toddlers, and young children, as well as their mothers, fathers, and families who have to struggle through drug dependency can be significantly mitigated with state policy. This includes a focus on preventing and mitigating the serious health, mental health and trauma-related issues associated with the epidemic. The number of cases of NAS children as a result of opioids rose to 1,057 in 2016. The Sycamore Institute states that the number of cases between 2002-2016 has increased “10-fold.” A common-sense analysis would indicate that many of those children are exactly the children who need high quality early intervention and early childhood programs, including seats in child care and pre-kindergarten settings. However, TQEE policy council members who work with children, families, and schools in multiple regions of the state identified a shared concern that children and families facing the opioid epidemic operate “under the radar screen”, receiving little to no treatment or early care until the children show up in kindergarten with a multitude of health, emotional, and trauma-related issues. This puts a burden on school systems to provide needed resources and services or to connect families to them, after the fact. The horrendous impact of the crisis on Tennessee’s children could be ameliorated if the legislature takes action to ensure they receive the necessary support and protection.



Other legislative and policy items we support.

- ★ *Defend TNReady* – At least two legislators have publicly announced their intentions to file bills to undo the TNReady testing process and its connection to teacher accountability. While TNReady is not administered to early grades, it is the first benchmark in 3rd grade and it is critical to ensure TN stays on track to continue student academic performance improvements.
- ★ *Support Expansion of Early Childhood Home Visiting* – The Tennessee Department of Health has proposed restoration and recurring funding for evidence-based early childhood home visiting programs. We agree with this budget priority to support parents as their child’s first and most important teacher.
- ★ *Support Expansion of ACEs Innovation Grants* – State funds provide grants for government and communities to implement policies, programs and practices that utilize the latest brain science to prevent and mitigate the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). We applaud the work of the Building Strong Brains Tennessee (BSBTN) public-private partnership that spearheads this important work critical to improved education and health outcomes for Tennessee.



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